

**SPECIAL MONSTER ISSUE!**

# **SUPER-SCIENCE**

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**FICTION**



## **VAMPIRES**

**From Outer Space**

BY RICHARD F. WATSON

## **The Abominable Creature**

BY F. X. FALLON

## **MOURNFUL MONSTER**

By Dan Malcolm

# SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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## CONTENTS

### NOVELETTES

- MOURNFUL MONSTER** by *Dan Malcolm* ..... 2  
A thing of horror! Yet it could think—and feel
- VAMPIRES FROM OUTER SPACE** by *Richard F. Watson* .. 58  
The weird seven-foot bats spread fantastic terror

### SHORT STORIES

- THE ABOMINABLE CREATURE** by *F. X. Fallon* ..... 36  
It was loathsome, vile beyond all endurance!
- THE HUGE AND HIDEOUS BEASTS** by *James Rosenquest* 92  
They made men tremble with nightmare fear
- A CRY FOR HELP** by *Eric Rodman* ..... 113  
The strange beings could alter a man's brain

### FEATURES

- LOOK TO THE STARS** by *Scott Nevets* ..... 57
- NUCLEAR NEWS** by *Steven Rory* ..... 91

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W. W. Scott — Editor

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# THE HUGE AND HIDEOUS BEASTS

by JAMES ROSENQUEST

The big beasts were terrible and deadly. But even more terrible, even more deadly was the fearful reason that explained the way they existed on that strange planet

“UP periscope!” With a twinkle in his calm, grey eyes, Commander Forrester gave the customary order as the good spaceship *Wanderer* ‘surfaced’ at another planetary shoal in the shoreless expanse of galactic space—a carryover from the old days when he had commanded one of America’s atomic-powered submarines. When the first of the great globular ships had been built and declared ready for the starways, he had been the natural selection for its skipper.

“Aye, sir,” responded Lieutenant Muller crisply, with the faintest of smiles, and pressed

the green button in the wall of the command room. With a barely audible whirring, a great disk of alloy metal slid aside in the curved wall, exposing the window of foot-thick special glass. The bright yellow light of the planet’s distant sun flooded into the ship.

The ship’s assembled crew crowded forward—and gasped. The initial surprise gave way to a muted babble of voices as the highly-trained crew began to exchange technical comments and opinions.

“Another surprise for the log, eh Commander?” Lieutenant Muller murmured to his chief. The Old Man nodded



thoughtfully, stroking his chin.

The ship stood in the middle of a clearing that had been selected for the landing—about an acre of pebbly soil, slightly concave and very smooth, like a shallow amphitheatre or the dried-out bed of an artificial lake. Off to the right were some high, rounded hills—or perhaps they were the stumps of amputated mountains, incredibly old, worn featureless and smooth by vast eons of time.

Otherwise, nothing but the plants.

Vegetable monsters, reaching toward the livid sky like green skyscrapers, planted firmly in the black soil on stalks as thick as an earthly redwood tree and tapering off, some two hundred feet up, into asparagus-like tops surmounted by an umbrella of immense, fleshy leaves.

They were immediately dubbed “asparagus” by the crew, with the frowning exception of Hopkins, the botanist. But even he could not deny their succulent appearance, as if they were good enough to eat. Some one suggested gar-

nering a few for the next meal's vegetable course, and there was laughter all around.

“Many a truth is spoken in jest,” said a quiet voice pontifically, and the slight form of Kim Lee, the pharmacist, elbowed through the crew, almond eyes narrowed with thought.

Muller laid a friendly hand on his frail shoulder when he finally reached the porthole and raised himself on his toes for a better look.

“Now, now, Lee,” the Lieutenant joked, “don't try to pre-empt my specialty. If anybody around here is going to get psychic impressions, I will!”

The little Oriental smiled modestly and shrugged his shoulders. “True enough,” he admitted, “You've been trained in ESP. I haven't. But I have noticed something. I wonder if any one else has.”

Muller put his hands on his hips. “What now, super-sleuth,” he asked good-naturedly, alluding to the pharmacist's hobby of twentieth century detective fiction.

Kim Lee continued didac-

tically: "Look straight ahead into that over-sized asparagus, then fan your eyes slowly to the right and then to the left."

Muller complied in good humor, not knowing what to expect. After a few seconds he grunted in surprise. He then yielded to the Old Man, who stepped forward and followed the same procedure, squinting his pale grey eyes against the glare.

He turned around and looked down at Kim Lee from his six-foot-plus, his face serious. "I see what you mean. At first sight that forest of asparagus has the random appearance of a grass lawn. When you look closer, those monster vegetables seem to fall into a pattern, like an orange grove, in more or less straight rows. Is that what you had in mind?"

Kim Lee nodded somberly. One by one, the other crew members pressed close to the window and followed the same scanning procedure, the initial murmurs of disbelief slowing dying out. The botanist, Hopkins, put the final seal of acceptance on Kim Lee's theory.

"Gentlemen," he said reluctantly, "I have to agree. The arrangement of the plants—they cannot be called trees—is, if I may pun, irregularly regular." His face colored slightly as he added: "Almost as if they had been planted. . . ." His eyes widened in astonishment at his own suggestion.

Silence fell over the crew.

That night, several members of the crew tossed and rolled on their cots, not sure whether they had heard or merely dreamed it: a far-off trumpeting, like the challenge of a bull elephant, but muffled, as if the sound were damped by miles of strangely succulent plants. The combination of that great sound with the suggestion of distance aroused stirrings of troubled imagination that were quickly thrust out of mind.

In his own cubicle, Lieutenant Muller rolled over suddenly and sat upright on the edge of his cot. He groped toward the table in the ensuing echoless silence, found his cigarettes in the dark, and lighted one. He regarded the glowing,

orange-red tip in the black-velvet darkness, coaxing his mind into the receptive hypnoidal state.

At last the impression came, and he groaned to himself: "Oh, no!"

He could not get back to sleep the rest of that night.

**T**HE day after planet-fall dawned with deceptively cheerful brightness. The planet's atmosphere was exceptionally clear and cloudless, and there seemed to be no elevations other than the effete hills to the right of the inspection porthole, so that the great yellow sun came up, almost literally, like thunder.

The big, globular ship was a beehive of activity, as the various crew members prepared for preliminary explorations. Lieutenant Muller sat alone with the Commander in the conference room, and related the event of the night before, and his own—as yet formless—impressions of the new planet.

Commander Forrester ran one strong, gnarled hand through a stubble of grey hair.

"Between you and Kim Lee," he grunted, "you have the exploration party preparing for the first sortie as if they were going to a funeral."

"I know," admitted Muller, with a worried frown.

The Old Man lighted his ancient pipe—a real antique from the early twentieth century—and veiled himself behind clouds of fragrant blue smoke.

He continued: "On top of Kim Lee's discovery yesterday and your intuition of last night, you issued instructions that the exploring party must carry a portable atomic cannon! As if the flare-guns were not enough to reduce a full-grown elephant to a well-done meat patty!" He shook his grizzled head and sighed. "Well, you must know what you are doing. You were certainly right in the beta-Centauri incident."

Muller replied somberly: "I would have given anything to be wrong. We lost a good man in Moroney, although Doctor Wiley is doing a good job of filling in for him."

There was a knock on the

open door. The Commander looked up. "Come in, Prentice."

The ship's balding, middle-aged chemist stepped over the high sill and approached Forrester, waving a strip of paper tape punched with round holes.

"Here it is, Chief," he crowed, "another planet with good, breathable air for red-blooded mammals like us!"

The Old Man waved away the tape impatiently. "You know I can't read that inverted Braille. Tick it off for me."

Prentice scanned the perforated strip with considerable satisfaction. "Oxygen content slightly above terrestrial level—but this will just give the crew a little added pep. Carbon dioxide level also higher than on earth—will only make them breathe deeper."

He looked toward Lieutenant Muller. "Warn them against over-oxygenation. If they begin to feel a little light-headed, they must make a conscious effort to control their rate of respiration. Aside from that, there are satisfactory levels of nitrogen and oth-

er inert gases. Temperature range and humidity quite comfortable. Ultra-violet and infra-red radiation from that yellow giant are within the safe range."

Commander Forrester knocked the dottle from his pipe and shook his head. "I never cease to be amazed by the automatic analyzer. By the by, does Wiley have his report ready yet?"

"He asked me to give it to you, sir. The bacterial content of the soil and air is—nil."

The Commander leaned forward in his chair. "Nil?"

The chemist nodded.

Muller looked at his chief significantly. "This is a complete reversal of all our past experience. Wherever we found life at all, there have always been micro-organisms."

Forrester shifted his big frame uneasily in his chair. "Too artificial," he muttered. "Still, so much the better for us. No chance of contracting something as horrible as the Venus rot." He filled his pipe again slowly. "This is not the first time I have wished we could stow a helicopter on



board, and eliminate the necessity for exploration on foot."

He struck the table decisively with his palm. "Go ahead, Fred. Take over. It's all yours now."

Lieutenant Muller stood up, saluted quickly, and left the command room.

The exploration party was ready: six men, including Muller, complete with testing equipment, pith helmets, flare guns—and the portable atomic cannon, loaded for firing. The lieutenant pressed the button in the wall and a section moved outward, settling slowly down until the far end touched lightly on the pebbly ground and came to a halt. He raised his hand informally and stepped out on the ramp, followed by the rest of the party.

The air smelled clean and good, and somewhat invigorating, and the temperature was in the eighties, but there was not a man who did not look longingly back at the great, cool, protective cave that was the *Wanderer*.

The absolute quiet was broken only by the crunching

of the pebbles under foot. There might have been the barest, rubbery rustling of the great, fleshy leaves, as if the gigantic vegetables were discussing the intruders among themselves.

As they climbed the slight grade of the clearing toward the nearest rim, Muller surveyed it again briefly, struck by the saucer-like uniformity of the acre-wide depression. He turned to the biologist to comment on it, but stopped with his mouth open.

The ground had trembled slightly underfoot.

Muller looked at Polya, the geologist, with a worried frown. "Earthquake?"

The geologist shook his head. "Not likely. When the ship made its preliminary circling of the planet, there were no signs of volcanic formations. Nothing but low hills. This hunk of matter is old—very old." He added disgustedly, "This is not a geologist's dream. Not an interesting formation."

At last they stood on the rim of the saucer. Several hundred yards behind lay the

protection of the ship. Ahead was the endless forest of 'asparagus.' As they approached, they realized that the growths were farther apart than had been apparent from the ship—perhaps several hundred feet. The regular spacing was also very obvious now.

They stopped at the enormous base of one of the green towers while the botanist wielded a small power-saw to cut out a section of stalk. He examined the slice under a microscope, muttering under his breath. Finally he looked up.

"Most curious," he announced. "The cellular structure is coarse and large, but simple and very regular. There seems to be a high fat and protein content, similar to the soya bean."

Lieutenant Muller interposes casually: "Almost as if somebody with a fancy biological erector set had put the things together?"

The botanist snorted. "Who dreamed that up—you or Kim Lee?"

The Lieutenant smiled—but he was not at all amused.

His feeling of uneasiness had grown suddenly stronger...

AN hour later, they came to the first body of water they had seen so far.

The stream was a hundred yards across. The banks on either side were slightly irregular, but the water flowed slowly and smoothly—and straight as an arrow, from east to west.

Muller threw down the gauntlet. "Now," he challenged, "let some one step forward and tell me that this is a natural river bed." There were no takers.

Three rubber rafts were inflated with bottles of compressed air, and they crossed the shallow water in pairs, Muller sharing the leading raft with the geologist. They left the three rafts inflated on the bank, ready for instant re-use if needed.

Muller took a compass bearing and they struck due south, a course facilitated by the straight lane between rows of giant plants. Despite the rapidly rising yellow sun, the party made its way deeper into

heavy shade, cast by the almost solid umbrella of huge leaves almost two hundred feet overhead.

The excited babble first indulged in by the party—like small boys whistling past a grave yard—had gradually died out, giving way to silent boredom and then to plain depression, as repeated stops and samplings of the soil revealed nothing of interest. The unending ranks of towering plant monsters blended into a solid wall of green at a distance of about a thousand yards, effectively screening off land formations, if there were any. The ground was uniformly level and composed of rich black soil, making the absence of other plant life all the more extraordinary.

It was during the third hour that Lieutenant Muller raised his hand silently in the halt signal, and lifted his face as if sniffing the air. A faint breeze had sprung up.

"Does any one else get that odor?"

There was an answering chorus of sniffs. The biologist spoke first.

"You're right, Fred. A sort of acrid smell, like a cross between the lion house and the reptile pits at the zoo."

Muller rapped out tensely: "Flare guns out and at ready position! I think we're about to contact the first animal life on this phoney planet."

**T**HE blast of sound was like the combined scream of a dozen express trains bearing down on them, trapped like a stalled motor vehicle on a grade crossing. They clapped their hands to their ears and staggered like drunken men. After a few seconds they removed their hands cautiously. The sound had died away, but their ear-drums still ached. The acrid scent had been replaced by an overwhelmingly fetid, hot breath of air, as if a great beast had opened its maw and breathed in their faces.

The ground trembled again. The ear-shattering scream was repeated.

"My God!" some one gasped.

They stood almost on tip-toe, straining every muscle,

searching with feverish eyes in the general direction of the sound.

Then, without further warning, a mere half mile away, the green wall wavered like grass in the wind, and trembled, and parted like flimsy bamboo curtain.

And then it was upon them, with a speed that paralyzed, and a hugeness that froze the limbs.

Screaming its rage and hatred, it bore down, a mountain that moved. It was behemoth and leviathan rolled into one, all the monsters of fact and fancy rolled into one, composed of equal parts of madness and delirium.

And where it crashed unheeding against the sides of the towering plants, they swayed and shuddered to their roots, and their tossing branches clawed frantically at the lurid sky.

Lieutenant Muller was the first to recover his wits.

"Flare guns ready," he shouted through the pandemonium. "*FLARE GUNS READY!...FIRE!*"

It was to their eternal credit

that not a man broke ranks. They stood in a straight line, shoulder to shoulder, their super-charged blasters aimed at the horror that shambled by day.

They fired in unison.

The air sparkled and crackled, and the thundering monstrosity was momentarily obscured in a cloud of blue fire.

The ragged cloud of protonic flame cleared away. The beast had come to a confused halt, stunned and blinded and injured.

But it was injured...not dead. The incredibly tough hide around the reptilian head and shoulders was charred and smoking, and steam rose from blood-oozing fissures in its living armor.

But it was not dead... It screamed again, pain mingled now with the hatred and fury, and the six tremendous stumps of legs began to move again, carrying the mountain of flesh toward them once more across the quaking ground. It extended the flat, ugly head toward them on the elongated neck of a brontosaurus and hissed like a thousand serpents. The

tiny eyes had been scorched and blinded by the blast, but it still lumbered forward, guided by the scent of the group of puny interlopers.

It was too close to use the atomic cannon, whose small, controlled fire-ball would still be too close for the safety of the group. Muller shouted a command again, his throat raw with the effort. A second blast from six guns enveloped the beast in blue fire, and under its temporary cover the little party turned and ran in the direction of the stream and the rubber rafts. The earth quivered beneath their flying feet, and they knew they were being followed by the living nightmare.

Muller looked back over his shoulder and gasped to his nearest companion: "We'll never make it!"

They were a few hundred yards from the river when Muller made a rapid mental inventory and realized that he had only *four* companions—instead of five...

He looked back. The botanist had staggered and fallen to his hands and knees, the be-

hemoth a bare hundred yards behind them. Somehow, Muller made his voice heard above the din and brought the other members of the party to a stop. They raised their flare guns, but it was too late, even if the creature had not been so close as to make the botanist's inclusion in the blast almost inevitable.

They watched, sick and shaken to the depths of their souls as it dipped the great reptilian head and snapped up the screaming botanist like a fowl pecking at an insect. The rows of jagged teeth came together with an audible clash, and the frail human screaming stopped. Some one became violently ill as one severed leg dropped to the ground from between the grinding jaws.

There was no longer need for hesitation. While the monster was momentarily distracted by the strange new morsel of food in its gore-dripping maw, the remainder of the party retreated to a safe distance and raised the small atomic cannon. Like the 'bazooka' of the twentieth century wars, it spat out its rocket.

They closed their eyes until they heard the blast and felt the concussion. When they opened them again, they saw the miniature mushroom-cloud rising rapidly toward the tree-tops. They made their way to the shattered bulk on trembling legs, horrified and grief-stricken. No trace remained of Hopkins.

The head had been blasted from the colossal body, and lay five hundred yards away. The enormous hulk still quivered with the tattered remnants of tenacious life, and the hindmost pair of the six tree-stump legs twitched spasmodically.

Muller circled the smoking hillock of flesh dully, taking measurements and making observations almost mechanically, then produced a camera and took pictures from several angles. He repeated the procedure with the severed head. When he was finished he gestured silently, with infinite weariness, and the survivors followed him mutely to the river's edge and into the waiting life-rafts, and finally

back to the sanctuary of the *Wanderer*.

AN hour later, after the five survivors had relaxed and thrown off much of the shock under a stiff dose of Pacificol, the newest tranquilizer, the ship rose five hundred feet and floated southward like a toy balloon on a vagrant current of air. Requiring minutes where the trip by foot had taken the party three hours, the *Wanderer* soon hovered over the spot where a man and a monster had both met violent ends. The rest of the crew turned pale to their lips at the sight of the still-smoking corpse televised on the command room's wall-screen.

Still a few miles further south from the scene of the gruesome tragedy, the viewers were staggered by the sight of an entire herd of the leviathans wallowing in an enormous swamp and basking in the warmth of the sun. Several of the hell-beasts were tearing huge hunks from the stalks of the 'trees' almost halfway up. One giant plant, gnawed at from two sides, crashed down

with the impact of a felled redwood, and was at once attacked by several ravenous beasts; who tore at the fleshy delicacy of the soft tip and its crown of immense leaves.

Several of the crew were all for destroying the six-footed nightmares with the ship's atomic armament. Commander Forrester was willing to do so until, acting on an indefinite hunch, Muller dissuaded him.

The Lieutenant sat now over the customary chess game with Kim Lee while they waited on dinner. With a murmured "sorry" the little Oriental took Muller's remaining rook with one of his knights. The Lieutenant swept the pieces to the floor with one ham-like fist and stood up suddenly.

Kim Lee stooped down and began to gather up the pieces placidly, as if it were a normal, daily occurrence. His square-jawed face turning red to the roots of his hair, Muller joined the pharmacist on the floor and assisted him in garnering the carved wooden pieces.

"No wonder you Orientals

look like twenty years old when you're twice that age," he grumbled. "You never seem to let anything bother you." Then he added gruffly: "Sorry, Lee. Really I am."

"Tut, and again tut," replied the pharmacist lightly, "you needed the outlet. The catharsis did you good."

They resumed their seats over the empty board, but Lee sensed the officer's mood, and delicately replaced the pieces in their box. "Let's just talk. No more chess today."

Muller grunted assent, then pounded softly but insistently on the table's edge. "It's my fault," he groaned. "My fault and mine alone that Hopkins is lying now in the gut of that god-awful monstrosity. There wouldn't even be anything left to put together for a decent burial." He buried his face in his hands.

Kim Lee coughed discreetly. "Confucius said," he broke in softly, "that thought is the best antidote for emotion."

Muller looked up suspiciously. "I don't recall ever reading that."

Lee shrugged deprecatingly.

"One of his less-known sayings." His dark, almond eyes narrowed in thought. "Let us pass the time with a little deduction," he added, and smiled as Muller sat up with interest.

"First, we have the regular spacing of the 'asparagus' plants, like trees in an orange grove. Your expedition confirmed this arrangement. Second, they comprise the only vegetation on the planet, so far as we can determine. Third, the stream of water you crossed, which is so straight and regular as to suggest an artificial irrigation ditch rather than a natural river. Fourth, the complete absence of bacterial life—an absolute, biological impossibility. Fifth—the presence of a herd of these beasts in a convenient swamp. And, by the way, whoever called it a herd used a singularly pregnant word."

Muller's jaw dropped. "I had the same impression, but did not pigeon-hole the facts as neatly as you just have. What you are getting at—?"

"Exactly," Kim Lee nodded solemnly, "the beasts consti-

tute somebody's—or *something's*—food supply, like a herd of domesticated cattle, although they seem far from tame."

Muller gnawed at his fingernails, his intense blue eyes squinting with worried thought. At last: "Fine, so far. But if these mountains of muscle and armor, by stretching imagination, are the food supply, then who are the—*master race*? And where do they keep themselves?"

"Our aerial surveys of the planet have revealed absolutely no artificial structures, or anything that could be regarded as dwellings. And any race that could breed and use these creatures as a source of food would have no reason, for example, to live underground. They should have an immense, surface civilization covering most of the planet's surface, with the exception of the 'groves' of vegetables and the breeding grounds for the herds. Yes? No?"

Kim Lee's smooth yellow brow furrowed slightly. "That objection I readily concede," he murmured. "Yet what other



explanation can there be? The whole planet is artificial to an extreme—'phoney,' as you put it so succinctly."

He looked across at the officer, but the latter seemed to be lost in thought and unaware of the pharmacist's last remark. His eyes had the far-away, dreamy look that Lee had come to recognize and respect—the look of one whose natural ESP faculty had been trained and sharpened in one of mother Earth's experimental parapsych centers.

The pharmacist remained silent until the Lieutenant 'returned' of his own accord—until the staring eyes pulled back from immense distances and converged to present time and place, and focussed on him again.

Muller was pale but firm-jawed, like one who has arrived at an unpalatable conclusion, but was nonetheless determined to follow it to its ultimate consequences. The rugged face at last broke into one of its rare smiles that gave him an almost boyish look. Reaching out, he took Lee's frail, blue-veined hand in his

own and pumped it until the slightly-built pharmacist thought his arm would detach at the shoulder.

"Intuition and deduction!" the Lieutenant exclaimed, chuckling. "The two of us make an unbeatable combination!"

He stood up, tall and massive in the small private cubicle. "Kim Lee, my lad," he crowed, "you left something out in your excellent enumeration of the facts—and I think I have it!"

"The sixth and final point, that explains everything!"

THEY sat in the command room on either side of the Old Man, Kim Lee somewhat diffidently, Muller confidently. The fourth member of the conference sat on the other side of Muller: the astronomer and astrophysicist, Professor Newman. From an array of charts and photographs spread out before him on the table, he selected one photo and handed it to the second-in-command.

"This is an electronic telescope enlargement of the plan-

et's satellite. A dead body like our own moon, but half its size and only some hundred thousand miles from the parent body. It therefore completes its cycle in about ten of Garganta's days. By the way, if there are no objections, I have christened this planet Garganta, with obvious reference to the huge size of its two life-forms: plant and animal."

Muller grunted non-committally and took the photo that the astronomer offered him. Commander Forrester leaned forward to get a closer look.

"Just another worn-out, airless satellite," he commented through lush clouds of tobacco smoke, "like so many we have encountered—which is why I did not bother to give the order to land on it." He looked at his aide anxiously. "Was that wrong, Fred? Could this be it?"

Muller studied the dreary craters and vast 'seas' of fine pumice powder, and shook his head slowly. "No," he replied grimly, "I'm pretty sure it isn't—and it would have been a sorry day for us if it was,

and we had landed—and what I suspect is true!"

He handed the photo back to the astronomer. "What's next, Professor?"

The astrophysicist handed him another picture, one of a small, cloudy disk strongly resembling Terra's veiled neighbor, Venus. "A strange parrallel," remarked Newman. "The planet we are now on—Garganta—is the third from this system's sun. This body," he added, tapping the glossy print with a long finger, "is next closest to the star, and seems to be perpetually veiled in mist or clouds of some sort, like Venus. It is impossible to penetrate this barrier with the electron telescope and observe the surface. I really wish we could—"

Muller broke in, speaking heavily. "Sorry, Professor, I don't think we may ever get closer than we are to it right now..." He added suddenly: "How close is it at the present time?"

Newman thought briefly. "About thirty million miles. Come to think of it, it's approaching perigee with Gar-

ganta now—that is, coming as close to it as it ever will for about ten years. . . .”

Muller snapped his fingers and stood up, and the other three men were shocked to see the expression of fear on that craggy face. “Commander,” he said tensely, “please issue this order at once, for God’s sake. If I am right, it is of the utmost urgency.” He whirled on Kim Lee. “Lee, do you have a good recollection of the televised viewing of that herd today?”

Commander Forrester broke in: “I can have the film re-run for you, if you like—”

Muller waved his hand with unconscious brusqueness. “Well, Lee?”

“As I recall,” said the little Oriental slowly, “there seemed to be only two sizes of beasts: either mountain-size, apparently the fully grown adults; or just hill-size, probably the infants— Heaven protect us! As a matter of fact, I also recall great, white, semi-spherical objects lying about on the swamp, like so many eggshells.”

The Lieutenant rapped the

table excitedly. “Exactly! A crop of babies has been hatched recently. Being reptilian, the beasts are on their own from birth. They are not dependent on the parents for food, like mammals. And this means that the parents, fully grown, are now ready for the slaughter!”

He swung about, facing the Commander again, and ground out: “I implore you, sir, give the order to the Chief Engineer. We must get off Garganta—*AT ONCE!*”

**T**HE *Wanderer* hung motionless in space, a million miles out. Relatively motionless, for it had to match the velocity of Garganta in its orbit in order to remain at the same distance. Against the black infinity of space, its non-reflecting outer shell would have been undetectable to any observer not specifically looking for it, and not knowing its approximate position. And Muller was most emphatic that it must lie on the *far* side of the planet—not between it and its veiled sis-

ter. And this was well for them, indeed...

After forty-eight hours, Muller was striding up and down in the command room, while the Old Man watched him with patient amusement and the barest glimmering of doubt. "Sit down, Fred. You'll wear a hole right through the floor and find yourself in the outer shell."

Muller did not reply to his superior, but kept glancing at the screen that covered one entire wall, and on which the electronic telescope enlarger cast an image of the acre-wide, pebbly saucer that had been the ship's berth so recently.

By the thirty-sixth hour after leaving Garganta, Muller was cursing his intuition and Kim Lee's deductions. "But it's got to be right!" he shouted, and struck the table a blow that made even the placid Commander start, and cough over his pipe.

"Now, now Fred—"

Professor Newman hurried in, his ascetic face chalk-white and his lips compressed to hairline thinness. "You were

right, Lieutenant, you were right!" he said, with undertones of incredulity and fear, and handed over a sheaf of glossy photos numbered consecutively, his hands trembling.

Muller studied them silently, handed them to his chief without a word. A small, luminous dot, spark-like, could be seen detaching itself from the parent body of the veiled planet. And in each successive photograph the tiny spark was farther away from the main disk, as if hurled outward at enormous velocity.

LATE afternoon was casting shadows over the still, silent face of Garganta when the "Others" landed, settling their titanic spheroid gently as thistledown, until it rested in the great concave landing area it had used so many times before, its enormous, curved bottom filling the saucer-like depression from rim to rim.

It was like a small moon, or a large asteroid. It was the end of inter-planetary transports, and the beginnings of an artificial planetoid. It was

an engineer's dream, but an explorer's nightmare.

And then a vast section of the hull opened out and settled down as a ramp, the far end touching lightly at the very edge of the monstrous forest, like a stupendous mockery of the *Wanderer's* own earlier procedure. Somebody stifled a scream. Perhaps it was the astronomer. No matter.

Through the vast, yawning port and down the tremendous ramp half-crawled, half-stamped the Scouts, followed by the Herdsmen and then the Butchers, wearing complex devices and weapons attached at the thinner portions where each segment of the long, scabrous body was attached to the next segment.

The innumerable pairs of 'feet' were sheathed in something like metallic shoes. And the heads... The eyes unwinking and many-faceted, like an insect's... The giant maws, held shut with grotesque primness...

It was to Kim Lee's credit, at this point, that he had suggested removing the evidence

of the 'crime' before the *Wanderer* had fled to safety in the womb of galactic space. So it was that the carcass of the beast had been removed from the forest of plant giants, borne aloft on an extension of the spaceship's anti-grav field, and deposited in the nearby hills and buried under tons of earth.

As it was, the Others followed almost the exact route of the exploration party, and so on to the breeding grounds, where they descended with utter ruthlessness on their herd, killing many of the adults with their unknown weapons and carrying them off on their backs, while others were driven, trumpeting with terror, into the interior of the cargo ship. A few adults were left behind with the young of the herd: the larder, evidently, was filled.

Night was sweeping over that side of Garganta when the herding and slaughtering was finally done. The scouts and the Herdsmen and the Butchers disappeared into the depths of their metallic asteroid. The ramp swung upward

and closed and became a part of the vast, seamless hull. Gently as thistledown borne on a vagrant breeze, the great globe rose into the air, arced out into space, and dwindled rapidly as it hurtled toward its shrouded parent planet.

“OF course,” said Muller smugly, “the sixth point was the curved depression we berthed in when we landed on Garganta. If everything else on the planet was artificial, that had to be, too. Its very appearance should have been the tip-off at the very start. The curved surface was absolutely much too smooth and regular.

“But the mind simply refused to acknowledge that there existed a space vehicle big enough to make that indentation. Or that there were beings large enough to handle it.” He pushed a pawn deep into Kim Lee’s center.

The pharmacist studied the move. “Wiley, our esteemed biologist,” he said, “seems to think that we may have unwittingly contributed to the extinction of a great race. He

believes that the masters created the artificial environment on Garganta, completely freeing it of all bacterial life, so that their herds could grow big and strong.”

The Lieutenant nodded. “It makes sense. We add anti-biotics to the feed of our own fowl and cattle to make them grow bigger and healthier. Now, I suppose Wiley means, we have contaminated the planet with the micro-organisms that humans always carry around in abundance. Come to think of it, our parting view of Garganta, after the masters left, showed some of the adult beasts going around in circles and others lying on their sides as though they were sick.”

“And, of course,” added Kim Lee, moving a piece, “the masters will probably contract something before they realize what has happened. No doubt they have not experienced infection for countless ages. Sad, in a way, for they must be highly intelligent. Yet—who knows? Perhaps they might have felt like star-wanderers some day, and stumbled

onto poor little Terra!"

Muller replied to his opponent's last move. The pharmacist moved again, removing the Lieutenant's remaining rook with one of his knights.

The officer groaned, then: "Oh well, he who trips twice over the same stone deserves to break his shins, as the ancient proverb goes."

Kim Lee squinted suspi-

ciously. "By Confucius?"

The Lieutenant grinned broadly. "No—by Robert Muller!"

The *Wanderer* plunged into hyperspace, literally vanishing from sight—had there been any one to observe in the great emptiness—and began the long journey home.

THE END

